

REDEEMING THE TIME

FROM THIS WORLD
TO THE FATHER

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Passiontide and Easter



MARY PERKINS RYAN

Pamphlet on the Liturgical Year



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From This World to the Father

Passiontide, Holy Week and
Easter Week

by

Mary Perkins Ryan

(With Study-Club Questions)



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Introduction

With the First Sunday in Passiontime, we enter on the final stage of preparation for Easter or, as the Church says, "the Paschal feasts." Originally, this meant only the Easter Vigil and its Mass. Pasch means "Passover" or "passage" (perhaps the best English rendering would be "crossing over"). And it is at the Easter Vigil that we celebrate Christ's "passage" from this world to the Father and our passage in Him and with Him. Both are foreshadowed in the Jewish Passover which celebrated the Hebrews' "passage" from Egypt through the Red Sea, on their way to the Promised Land.

A crossing-over is an action, a journey from here to there. We look at a journey from one standpoint before we have taken it and

from another afterward. During Lent and Passiontime, through Palm Sunday and the first three days of Holy Week, we look at Christ's Pasch from the standpoint of "before." With Holy Thursday, we begin to take part in the action, the journey itself. For when our Lord offered His Eucharist at the Last Supper, He made present the whole reality of His Pasch under the sacramental signs and, immediately after the Supper, He entered on His Passion. On Good Friday, we celebrate the first aspect of Christ's Pasch, His death. On Holy Saturday, there are no services; we are to meditate with the Church on the invisible continuation of Christ's journey—His descent to the world of the dead, to the lowest degradation of our nature as it has become by sin.

Then, at the Easter Vigil, we keep watch for the coming of the Risen Lord who has now completed His "crossing-over." We celebrate the mystery of baptism by which we sacramentally make the same journey; we take part in the Eucharistic sacrifice representing this same journey and receive the Risen Lord as the anticipation and pledge of our fully sharing in His glorious life with the Father in the world to come. During Easter week, we celebrate the victory won,

the journey made and the life attained by Christ's Pasch.

Mindful of this, we can understand why the Church urges us so strongly to take part in her services on the great days of Holy Week. For it is by doing so that we most fully take part in the Lord's Pasch with the whole Church and receive the grace to make it our own. We should, therefore, make any plans that are needed to ensure that everyone in the family can attend these services; older children should certainly be encouraged to go to them all, including the Easter Vigil. It is clear also why we should make an effort to go to Confession early in Holy Week and not wait until Saturday afternoon. We want to have all possible obstacles removed, to be closely united with Christ before the great days of His journey begin.

Here again, at least as much as during the rest of the year, we need the daily personal prayer in which we absorb the Word of God given us in the liturgy and let it form us. And, when it is possible, we should give our family the opportunity to hear this Word also. For, as St. Paul will tell us on Palm Sunday, we are "to have the mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus."

Since this journey is one great act, the liturgy always presents it as a whole, though from different aspects. It may prove helpful, consequently, to look at some of the great themes which run throughout this season, interwoven with the great central theme of the Pasch.

“The Servant of the Lord”

On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week, we shall hear Isaiah's prophecy of the “Suffering Servant,” a portrait of our Lord redeeming and healing us by His freely accepted suffering and death. All the chants of the Masses during this season express the same mystery. We are to understand our Lord Himself as the singer of these psalms, speaking for Himself and for all the suffering servants of God throughout history, and even for all those who suffer from their own sins. For He took on Himself, with our nature, the burden of our suffering and our sins.

A great human poet can express his personal experience in such a way that it illuminates our own, however widely separated we are from him in culture or circumstances. The inspired poets could do this and much more. Since the Holy Spirit spoke through them, their expressions of their experiences

could express those of the very Word of God made man.

The Gospels refer frequently to the psalms; our Lord quoted them oftener than any other book; He prayed Psalms 21 and 34 as He hung on the Cross. Now, under the guidance of the Spirit, the Church includes them in her liturgy so that we can at least begin to enter into Christ's own human experience. True, He now suffers and dies no more. But He is the Christ who suffered and died for us; He continues to suffer in His members and brothers on earth. In meditating on these psalms and praying them, we come to know Him more fully; we enter more fully into the suffering of our neighbors; we begin to learn how to suffer with Christ.

These psalms refer frequently to the singer's "enemies." In the mouth of Christ and as Christian prayers, we are to understand these as meaning the real enemies of God and mankind, Satan and his legions. Our Lord's teaching and example show us that we are to love our human enemies, even those who have become instruments of evil. But we can and must hate and fight against our real enemies, "the rulers of this dark world."

Our Lord as "the Son of Man"

In the Gospel of Passion Sunday we see Jesus claiming to share God's own eternity and the Jews' reactions to His claim. In the Gospel for Passion Thursday, as in many other Gospels throughout the year, He exercises God's power of forgiving sins. All through His public life, by His teaching and His miracles, He claimed to be "of God," to share His nature and His power. In the first three Gospels and in their accounts of the Passion, He calls Himself the "Son of Man," thus showing Himself as the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy describing the more than human "Man" who was to come from heaven to establish God's kingdom forever. This is why, in St. Luke's account of the Passion (Wednesday in Holy Week), the High Priest immediately says, "Are you then the Son of God?" and why in all the accounts, our Lord's application of the title "Son of Man" to Himself is called blasphemy. It was for this, finally, that He was put to death, "to give witness to the truth" that "God so loved the world as to give His only Son."

Our Lord as "the Christ"

In the Old Testament, kings, priests and prophets were solemnly anointed by a mes-

senger of God, thus consecrating them for their office. And so the great King, Priest and Prophet promised by God to save His people was to be the "Messiah," which means "Anointed" in Hebrew, or "the Christ" which means the same thing in Greek. In the Gospels, we see our Lord not disclaiming but trying to keep in the background the fact that He is this promised Messiah, because a majority of His hearers — even the Apostles — expected an earthly king who would conquer all nations and establish Israel as ruler of the world. Only when there was no longer any danger of misunderstanding, during His trial, did He acknowledge that He was indeed "the Christ." But after His resurrection and the descent of the Spirit, the Apostles immediately proclaimed Jesus as "the Christ," the fulfillment of all Old Testament expectations, who had become in His human nature "the Lord," judge of the living and the dead (*see the Masses for Easter week*).

The Epistle on Passion Sunday speaks of Christ's Priesthood. The mystery of His anointing as King, Priest and Prophet, not by any material oil, but by His divinity, by the very Spirit of God, is brought out throughout the Chrism Mass of Holy Thursday. Here also we are shown the mystery of our share

in this unique anointing of Christ's, by the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and orders.

Christ's Death and Resurrection as a Victory

Like the first Exodus, this journey includes a conquest, a victory over the enemies of God. In the first Exodus, God overthrew the Egyptians by the miracles worked by "His mighty hand and arm outstretched," finally overwhelming them in the Red Sea. In His Passion, death and resurrection, our Lord overcomes the powers of evil and death by His perfect and loving obedience to His Father. God wins the victory by the mighty power whereby He raised Jesus' human nature from death and brought Him to the glorious life that is rightfully His as the Son of God.

In the chants of these two weeks we hear our Lord using the psalms to call out to God to save Him and give Him life, and expressing His perfect trust that He will be heard. In the Gospels of Passion week, we see the struggle between our Lord and the human instruments of the powers of evil beginning to reach its climax. More and more clearly He declares who He is and from whom He comes; more and more the opposition and

hatred of His enemies increases. The Gospels of the Passion, read on Palm Sunday, on Tuesday and Wednesday in Holy Week, and on Good Friday, show the outcome: Christ's Passion and Death that are the way to His triumph.

But the light of this final victory always shines through the liturgy, particularly in the Preface of the Cross: "that whence death had sprung, life might now arise, and he who conquered by a tree (in the Garden of Eden) might by the Tree (of the Cross) be overcome. . . ."

Christ's Death and Resurrection as His Sacrifice

The Epistle for Passion Sunday and the Easter liturgy show Christ's journey from our human condition through death to God's glory as His sacrifice. At once Priest and Victim, He offers Himself and is accepted by God, received in the sanctuary of God's Presence to share His own life. This is the perfect sacrifice, the fulfillment and realization of all the Old Testament sacrifices. But it is very important that we understand rightly what "sacrifice" means.

We are inclined to think that in any sacrifice, including Christ's, the death of the vic-

tim is what appeases God and somehow pays Him the worship, thanksgiving and especially the reparation for sin that are His due. Pleased by this death, we think, God is then disposed to grant us His favors. Modern Scripture studies clearly bring out the falseness of this external and legalistic notion, which seems to have been more or less applicable to pagan sacrifices, but not to basic Jewish tradition. In the thought of the Bible, all sacrifices were meant in one way or another to bring about a consecration of the people to their God, a closer union with Him. The immolation of the victim was only a means to this end; its purpose was, not death as such, but new life. This is what God signified in the prescribed sacrifices of the Old Law and this is what He brought about by the perfect sacrifice of Christ.

In the context of the first Exodus, the idea of sacrifice brings up first of all the Paschal Lamb, whose blood marked the doorposts of the Hebrews before their flight from Egypt and saved them from the destroying angel. The purpose of the immolation of the Paschal Lamb was, not its death, but the protection of God's people and the providing of the meal that inaugurated or commemorated their Exodus. This Lamb is a "type," a picture of

Christ saving us from eternal destruction. "These are the Paschal feasts in which is immolated the true Lamb whose blood protects and sanctifies the doors of the faithful." For we have been signed with Christ's mark at baptism, the baptismal "character" signified externally by the rite of signing our foreheads with the Cross.

The Epistle of Passion Sunday goes on to say that Christ is the "mediator of a new covenant." In the first Exodus, after the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea, God gathered them at the foot of Mt. Sinai to make a covenant, a solemn alliance with them. Moses read them God's Law; they all promised to obey it and live by it. Then he had animals slain and sprinkled with the blood both the people and the altar, which represented God; thus was ratified the covenant between God and His People. In biblical thought, blood is the symbol and the bearer of life. This sprinkling was seen as bringing about a community of life; the People now were God's own "blood-kin," as it were. Included in the idea of blood is the notion of it as "purifying" which seems strange until we realize that, as the bearer of life, it was seen as closely related by its nature to God, the Author of life. God has been, as it were,

driven from among His people by their sins. The yearly sprinkling with blood, the sign of His life-giving will and power, which the ancient Jews performed, was a sacrifice of atonement, "at-one-ment," offered so that God would once again dwell in their midst, and that they would be once more consecrated and united to Him.

At the Last Supper, which we commemorate on Holy Thursday, our Lord gave His Apostles His new Law of love. Then He offered His sacrifice, saying, "This is My Body which is given for you," and, "This is the cup of the new covenant in My Blood (quoted in the Communion verse of Passion Sunday). His Blood, His human life out-poured, was His offering, accepted by God and restored to Him in a new and glorious form. It effects a real community of life between ourselves and God when, at baptism, we are united with Christ in His death and resurrection.

Christ brought about what this yearly ceremony only foreshadowed. He entered the sanctuary of God's Presence with the offering of His own life, and so made "atonement," bringing about our consecration to God, our "at-one-ment" with Him.

Finally, the Epistle refers to Christ's offering Himself as a "victim unblemished in God's sight," recalling the total sacrifice called a holocaust. Here the blood of the victim was sprinkled on the altar, while the body was completely consumed with fire, transformed into smoke—thus passing over as it were into another sphere of existence. Here again, the immolation of the victim was only for the purpose of having it pass out of the sphere of the profane and into God's possession. It was a sign of the offerer's desire to offer himself wholly to God, to become His, to share His life.

Christ's sacrifice perfectly fulfilled what this sacrifice signified. As the Victim of His own sacrifice, He went through death and was taken up into God's own life; we make the same journey sacramentally at baptism and renew it at the Easter Vigil. We offer the same sacrifice and ourselves with it when we take part in the Mass.

Eternal Redemption

Now we can understand why the most commonly used term to describe our Lord's work is "redemption." For it includes all these aspects of an Exodus, a victory, a sacrifice. The word means buying-back or, better,

“taking possession again.” God is said to have redeemed His people at the first Exodus—freeing them by force from the possession of the Egyptians and making them His own by the covenant. The same word is used for all the deliverances of His people throughout their history from the yoke of one or another foreign power—all involving a routing of, and a victory over, the enemies of God. The first Exodus was inaugurated by the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb, freeing the Hebrews from the destruction with which God overwhelmed the Egyptians; then God took possession of His people by the sacrifice of the covenant. All this is perfectly fulfilled in Christ’s work. He has “secured eternal redemption”; in Him, God has “visited and redeemed His People.”

For Us, Christ Was Made Obedient Unto Death

Scripture and the liturgy continually repeat that our Lord did all this *for us*—“My Body which is given for you.” From the biblical idea of sacrifice, it is clear that “for you” means “for your sake,” “to benefit you,” and not “instead of you.” Our Lord did not die to save us from physical death; we still have to die as He did. He died to save us from the

death of eternal separation from God, of which physical death is the effect and the sign. He died to enable us to enter with Him into the eternal life which will finally mean also victory over physical death and our total restoration to God's life at the final resurrection.

Yet the Easter Vigil *Exsultet*, for example, sings that "for our sake Christ did away with the debt of Adam to the Eternal Father." What debt? The essence of sin is a turning away from God in pride and disobedience and refusal to open ourselves out to God's gift of Himself. It means refusing to accept the conditions of our creaturehood, which were such glorious conditions for the unfallen angels and for Adam. By Adam's sin, human nature returned to its native condition of liability to pain and the necessity of physical death.

Obviously, our return to God must now mean accepting these conditions. It must mean opening out to God under these conditions. And so, at the Incarnation, the Son of God took on this nature—"the form of a slave" as the Epistle for Palm Sunday calls it—so that in that nature He could make up for our disobedience and pride by His infinite filial love of the Father, His perfect obedience.

He took upon Himself the necessity of dying, not rebelling against it, but obediently submitting to it. And so He made up for, He made "satisfaction" for our disobedience and pride. But His love and obedience are not substitutes for ours. They make up for the love and obedience which we have not given, which the whole human race has not given. And by doing so, they make it possible precisely for us now to love God with His own love, to obey Him in and with Christ's obedience.

As I Have Loved You

This vital theme of Christ's loving obedience is brought out in many ways by the liturgy of these weeks, above all in the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening. "For us, Christ became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. Therefore God has exalted Him and given Him a name above every name" (Gradual). At the Last Supper, Christ put the whole of His redeeming work in the form of a sign, a prayer-act which could be repeated by those empowered to act in His person. This sign is a "Eucharist," a prayer and act of praise and thanksgiving offered in love to the Eternal Father. When we take part in the Eucharistic sacri-

fice, we are sharing in this act of love.

The Gospel, the ceremony of the *Mandatum* (the Commandment) and the Communion verse of Holy Thursday all show us that this love of God implies love for one another, love modeled on Christ's. We are to lay down our lives by "washing one another's feet," that is, in serving one another's needs. By taking part in this Mass, above all others in the year, we commit ourselves to loving God and one another with this humble and practical love. We commit ourselves to fostering, by this humble service, the unity of all men in Christ's love which was the object of His prayer at the Last Supper and which is the grace of the Eucharist.

On Good Friday, then, we pray for every class and condition of person in the Church and for those not yet included in her visible unity, that all may be reached by God's love revealed and shown us in Christ. And, at the Easter Vigil, we sing the praises of the Father's love for us: "O wonderful is the affection of Your love for us—to redeem the slave, You sent Your Son!"

God the Father is not the angry God of pagan imaginings who requires blood and death in order to be "appeased." On the contrary, it is the very wisdom and delicacy of

His love which has redeemed us in a way so suited to the freedom and dignity of our nature. He does not treat us as things to be taken over by force, but as persons to be won by love. He has not redeemed us from afar; He has come Himself to save us in such a way that, in His incarnate Son, man could return to God of his own free will, which is also God's will. And in this the Father shows His love for His incarnate Son, making Him the "first-born of many brethren," "that in all things He might have the primacy." He has redeemed us precisely so that we might be "sons in the Son."

Our participation in the Holy Week services, is meant to arouse us to active co-operation in God's plan. This is the meaning particularly of the four great Holy Week processions. In joining in the Palm procession at the beginning of Holy Week and in the adoration of the Cross on Good Friday, we profess our faith in God's design as affecting our own lives. As Christ will tell the disciples at Emmaus in the Gospel of Easter Monday, "It was fitting that Christ should suffer and so enter into His glory." In these processions, we profess this "fittingness"; we commit ourselves and our lives to God's plan in faith and hope that it is fitting

and necessary for us; we must suffer with Christ if we are to share His life with God, His glory.

Again, by taking part in the procession with the Blessed Sacrament on Holy Thursday, we profess our faith in the Christ present with us in His sacramental sacrifice, allowing us to share as one Body with Him in His access to the Father, in His worship of the Father "in spirit and in truth." And, finally, in the procession with the Paschal candle on Holy Saturday, we profess our faith in Christ's victory over sin and death, the victory which is ours in Him.

He Is Risen!

Everything in these two weeks, then, leads up to the Easter Vigil. Every great theme of Scripture, the liturgy and our Christian life finds a place here, in the lighting and blessing of the Paschal Candle, the Readings, the Blessing of the Font, Baptism and the Renewal of Baptismal vows and the first Mass of Easter. Here we keep vigil, awaiting the presence of our Risen Lord. Here, in the renewal of the grace of baptism, we go with Christ from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, from isolation to the unity of the Spirit, from death to life. Here we celebrate His Exodus

and ours in Him. Here we offer His sacrifice, newly admitted to the Father's presence with Him in His Easter triumph.

The day Mass of Easter Sunday and the Masses of Easter week form a continuous celebration of our life in and with the Risen Christ. The chants of these Masses are songs of victory, praising God's deliverance of His people and the wonderful things He does for us in the Church. The Epistles give us the original message of salvation in Christ as the Apostles first proclaimed it. Above all, we rejoice in the presence of our Risen Lord, given us in the Gospel accounts of His appearances to His disciples, given us by our participation in the Mass and Communion. Easter week is the week in the year when we are allowed most fully to anticipate the happiness of eternal life with Christ.

If we have really tried to hear and do God's Word during Lent, Passiontime and the great days of Holy Week, we shall surely not think of Easter Sunday as the end of an unusually religious period in the year. We shall see the Easter Vigil as the beginning of a more fully Christian life, a life more fully led in and with Christ. And we shall want to begin this life by sharing His joy as we have tried to share, to some small degree, in His sufferings.

Now that we can once again sing "alleluia" with the Church, we shall not want, if it can be helped, to limit our prayer to personal meditation on each day's Epistle and Gospel. We shall try to be present at each Mass of Easter week, so as to rejoice with Christ in the society of His own. We shall want to receive His Easter peace where He gives it most fully, in the assembly of the Church. For the mystery of Easter is above all a mystery of unity—the unity of the Church, of redeemed mankind brought into the very life of Christ with the Father, in the Spirit of love.

Study-Club Questions

1. What can be done in your family and your parish to foster intelligent participation in the great Holy Week services?
2. Why do some people who find it easy to attend Christmas midnight Mass seem to find it so difficult to take part in the Easter Vigil?
3. How would you dissuade a teen-ager from the notion of coming to the Easter Vigil just in time for Mass, to fulfill his Sunday obligation, and persuade him to take part in the whole ceremony?
4. How could devotion to the Masses of Easter Week be fostered in your parish?

5. How might the celebration of Easter Week be marked in our homes?

Suggestions for Reading

Note: In addition to the titles listed in Pamphlet No. 3, "Now We Go Up to Jerusalem," we suggest the following:

Becker, Karl. *O Truly Blessed Night*. St. Louis: Pio Decimo Press, 1956.

Bouyer, Louis. *The Paschal Mystery*. Chicago: Regnery, 1950.

Gaillard, Jean. *Holy Week and Easter*. Collegeville Liturgical Press, 1954.

Hynes, Emerson and Arlene. *Lent and Holy Week in the Home*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.

Winzen, Damasus. *The Great Sabbath Rest* (pamphlet). Collegeville: Liturgical Press.

